

We are living in the sort of days when it can be hard to see God’s presence in the world. Between the news and the newsmakers, we begin to ask, what’s happened to the world God intended? Why doesn’t somebody fix this? Why doesn’t God step in?

The Hebrew prophets labored with the same question. Hebrew prophets weren’t the kind of prophets who threw the dice and predicted the future. They would have had no opinion about who was going to win the next Stanley Cup. The role of the Hebrew prophets was to make God’s presence in their world tangible to people. They listened intently to God’s voice, then made sense of it for others. Most often by words. Sometimes by actions. Most often they were men. Sometimes, at least once, they were women.

Shiphrah and Puah who are named in Exodus 1:15 lived in Egypt some 3300 years ago. They were midwives, although today we would call them nurse practitioners. And for their actions, I would call them prophets. Puah and Shiphrah lived in very dangerous times. For 150 years foreigners had conquered and oppressed their country. Dynasties had risen and fallen like the waters of the Nile. Now a new Pharaoh had clawed his way into power and he didn’t trust the remnants of foreigners still living within his borders. He didn’t trust the Hebrew descendants of Joseph and his 12 prolific brothers. He meant to crush them so hard they could never rise against him.

He drove them into slavery and gave them so much work their men should have been too busy or too tired to have a family. It didn’t work. The exhaustion of a man laying bricks is not the exhaustion of a Pharaoh with too many concubines in his harem. The Hebrew women were fruitful and multiplied. Pharaoh was terrified the Hebrews would realize their strength and align with his enemies. Pharaoh’s heart was surely not merely sinful, but evil. He summoned the two midwives. He told them, *“When you are helping the Hebrew women during childbirth on the delivery stool, if you see that the baby is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live”* (v.16).

Pharaoh had condemned the Hebrews to worse than genocide. He believed in life after death, at least *his* life after death. He intended to live forever in the massive tomb his slaves were building. But in those days the Hebrews did not believe in life after death. They believed a man lived only as long as his sons’ and grandsons’ memories of him. And Pharaoh intended that they have no sons—no memories.

Now Shiphrah and Puah had Egyptian names, meaning, *Splendor* and *Beauty*. Yet they worked in the Hebrew slave camps. It couldn’t have been for the money. Slaves don’t make money. I like to think they were early examples of the kind of people who work with the dispossessed. I like to think they witnessed the mystery of life and death, took the oath of their calling, and determined they would serve life.

Shiphrah and Puah stumbled from Pharaoh’s court, each mute in her own fear. Puah was thinking of a young girl far away from her own mother and frightened by her first pregnancy. Shiphrah was thinking of an older woman torn apart by the loss of her other babies, now hoping against fear this midwife’s skills would bring her to full term and safe delivery. “I have felt a child’s heartbeat before it was born,”

whispered Puah. “I have turned a child in its mother’s womb,” sighed Shiphrah. “We cannot do this thing,” whispered Puah. “If we don’t, he’ll kill us. Our families too,” sighed Shiphrah.

That same day Pharaoh summoned them back to his palace. “Where are the baby boys?” he thundered. “Was I not perfectly clear? My soldiers say you’ve brought them none. Where are they!” And he shook his fist so hard his double crown nearly fell from his head and the slaves hiding behind the linen curtain quaked in terror. Shiphrah and Puah quaked too, of course, but that dawn they’d held new life in their hands and now they were too exhausted to think beyond the moment. “The Hebrew women are not like us,” said Puah. “No,” said Shiphrah, “they have their babies so fast, we can’t get to them before they’re up and back in their kitchens.” The two midwives looked at each other and nodded. “They’re not like us, great Pharaoh.”

“Can this be true?” Pharaoh glared at the priest kneeling at his feet. For though he had fathered many, many children by many, many beautiful wives and concubines, Pharaoh had never troubled himself with the details of childbirth. Adam Hamilton asks, “How did these two midwives get away with disobeying Pharaoh? They shaded the truth. They told Pharaoh the Hebrew women were so strong that they had already given birth by the time the midwives had arrived. And God blessed them for their faith, courage, and willingness to do what was right, which in this case included a bit of dishonesty in order to protect the children” (© 2017 Abingdon Press, *Moses*, p. 32).

This story was probably written 300 years after it happened. By then the Hebrew people were safely delivered into the Promised Land and beginning to write the oral history of their ancestors. In 300 years they had forgotten some of the details. They forgot, for instance, *the Pharaoh’s name*. Imagine that. The most powerful man in the world and the descendants of slaves had forgotten his name. But the two midwives who safely delivered their nation when its very existence hung by an umbilical cord, their names were remembered. “I like to think that by then many generations of baby girls had been named after them,” says Emily Sylvester.

What can this mean to us, here and now, so many years and far beyond anywhere Shiphrah and Puah could imagine? Puah and Shiphrah made God’s presence tangible in their world. But if they could hear us call them prophets, they would laugh, “No, no, not us. We’re too ordinary. In every birth there comes a moment as if life and death are weighed in the balance of a scale. We chose life. Of course, it would have been easier to do what Pharaoh said. But we were all those women had. God gave us opportunities every day and night to help others. Acting on God’s voice was hard work. But so is childbirth. And every mother knows its reward.”

It was almost as if God himself was in labor to give birth to a new world. He needed the help of these women. Now he needs ours. Adam Hamilton writes, “In the story of Moses birth, his deliverance from Pharaoh’s deadly decree, and his adoption into Pharaoh’s house, God is hardly mentioned. Yet it’s clear that God was active through the women involved. I mentioned this because it illustrates the way God usually works in our world—through people” (*Moses*, p. 38).

Look around you. Is there a child, a client, a neighbor who needs your help? Help him. Is there a parent, a student, a stranger who needs your love? You may be the only one she has. Love her. In your work, your homes, your communities God has chosen you to be partner in his creation. Don't let him suffer through childbirth alone. It's your hands he needs to deliver his work to the world.

Pharaoh's daughter found Moses in the river and adopted him as her son. She defied her father's command to put all male Hebrew babies to death. She must have been a courageous person too. Whether she knew it or not, Pharaoh's daughter sent Moses' sister for his own mother to nurse him until he was old enough to live with Pharaoh's daughter and become her son. There is a tremendous work of faith here in the women of this story: in the two midwives, in Moses' mother, Moses' sister and in his adopted mother, the Pharaoh's daughter.

If we trust that God is still at work in this world, we too may be playing a pivotal role in the story of God's salvation! Amen.

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